



hillside village of Pingan, which oversees harvesting on what I later find out is the Jinkeng Red Yao Autonomous Rice Field. Even the rice terraces have impressive-sounding names.

Ravenous after our journey, we are ushered to a makeshift restaurant as villagers reciprocate our gaping looks. A painted sign outside in English proclaims it to be the Countryside Cafe and Inn, and the proprietor furnishes us with English-language menus featuring a cornucopia of western food. But to our disappointment it seems the Countryside Cafe is out of just about everything.

How about a hamburger? "No."

A grilled cheese sandwich? "No cheese."

Tomato soup? "Sorry, no tomatoes."

With that, I head down to the village, where I have spotted a ramshackle store selling various foodstuffs. It turns out to be more counter than shop, but the owner stocks that most Chinese of meals: instant noodles. He even has Coca-Cola. It is a multicultural feast.

I take to the hills after eating, dodging the handful of native women prowling the area in the hope of selling their trinkets and cheap jewellery. The terraces undulate up, over and around the hills. Only on walking between

the rice paddies does their true scope become apparent: the Longji Hills are an agricultural project 600 years in the making. In a land where new architectural marvels are springing up in record time, this is a worthwhile reminder that truly astonishing sights take time to build. And it seems Lu back in Yangshuo was prescient – as I near the summit of one hill, the clouds part and the sun bathes the hillsides in a golden hue. It is almost biblical.

I come across the pile-on game while making my way down through the village to the bus that will take me back to my complicated life. For a moment, the poor child on the bottom of the pile and I catch each other's eye and he seems to be inviting me to jump on. If it weren't for the fact I'd probably kill him by doing so, I would.



Clockwise from main picture: every inch of land is put to use on the rice terraces surrounding the picturesque village of Pingan; exploring amid the hamlet's rustic houses; a youthful welcoming party; more terraces.

Getting there: Dragonair (www.dragonair.com) flies from Hong Kong to Guilin. Trips to the Longsheng rice terraces are most easily arranged at the many travellers' cafes on Yangshuo's West Street. A full-day trip costs about 120 yuan a person, depending on haggling ability. Independent guides and transport can also be hired in Yangshuo. Because of the distance, groups spend only a few hours on the terraces. To experience the villages and terraces fully, a day or two is necessary and arranging accommodation in Pingan usually requires a Putonghua-speaking guide. The cost of such trips can vary widely, depending on negotiating ability.